



Interactive Voice Response (IVR) Systems
SHHH Online Consumer Survey
October 2002

The IVR survey was posted on the SHHH web site for five days in October 2002. The survey focused on people who listen on the telephone acoustically with hearing aids, cochlear implants, or taking out the hearing aid. Due in part to limitations with the survey instrument, people who rely on TTY, VCO and other relay services were asked not to complete the survey.

201 people responded by the deadline. Where percentages are given, they refer to the percentage of respondents who answered a specific question.

67% said they listen on the telephone with a hearing aid, 8% listen with a cochlear implant, and 22% take out their hearing aid.

Consumers confirmed that they have difficulty understanding certain words or phrases in voice menu systems. 73% have difficulty virtually all the time (42%) or very frequently (31%), and 23% about half (16%) or a quarter (7%) of the time. Only 4% said they had difficulty rarely or not at all.

Consumers were asked to list their most frequently used responses when they first have difficulty navigating the IVR system, and were asked to list only three or fewer responses. 106 respondents repeat the menu, if possible, to try to understand it, 79 press zero to connect to a live operator, 102 stay on the line to connect to a live operator, 35 call again and try to understand the menu system, 30 disconnect the call and drop the matter, 65 ask someone with better hearing to complete the transaction for them, and 33 use the Internet to contact the company. None of the respondents reported writing by postal mail and only one said he or she faxed the company or organization.

The survey asked respondents to describe the impact of IVR systems on their ability to transact business by telephone. 79% of consumers described the impact as significant to profound (half to over 85% of calls). 11% estimated a third of their calls were adversely

affected. 8% thought only a few calls were affected (mild). 1% stated that IVR systems are fully accessible to them.

Consumers were asked to rate how much more time it takes them to navigate IVR systems compared to the time taken by people with normal hearing. Only 5% estimated it takes about the same time. 11% claim they avoid contacting companies by phone altogether because of their inaccessible IVR systems. 33% estimated their calls took twice as long, with another 11% reporting their calls took three or more times as long. 17% reported their calls took 125% of the time other people spent, and 18% thought their calls took 150% of the time.

Consumers were asked which accessibility features in an IVR system they would personally find most helpful. They were asked to rate the importance. Following are the options and how they were rated:

- Press a designated number to play the menu again. 80% highly important or important
- Press zero at the beginning of the menu system to speak to a live operator. (Pressing zero would be a “universal out.”) 95% highly important (83%) or important (12%)
- Press a designated number to go back to the previous menu (helpful if you made the wrong selection.) 81% highly important or important.
- The provision of a fax number and a policy of a response within 24 hours. 46% highly important or important. 54% rated this option as unimportant or neutral.
- Various designated numbers to be used for accessibility options with choices like "repeat the last ten seconds," "repeat choices more loudly," "repeat choices more slowly and clearly," "deepen the frequency of the voice," etc. 83% Highly Important (55%) or Important (28%).

It should be noted that providing an automatic connection to a live operator when there is no response would also be a highly utilized accommodation. In some cases, a person with a severe hearing loss may not hear the instruction to press zero to reach a live operator.

Many respondents indicated in their comments that they required communication with a human being who could accommodate their communication needs. Frequent complaints were about the common use of higher-pitched female voices for voice menu systems instead of lower-pitched voices. (Because hearing loss in the high frequencies is much more common than in the low frequencies, many people with hearing loss understand low-pitched voices better than high-pitched voices.) Also noted was that accented speech from live operators is very difficult for many people with hearing loss to understand; in some cases, a few individuals preferred voice menu systems because typically the menu systems avoid using accented speech.